



## On the Battlefield: Cambodian Uniformed Services March Towards Health

The Cambodian military and police are groups with social conditions which put them more at risk for sexually transmitted infections and HIV disease than any other group. USAID/Cambodia and its partner in development, Family Health International, have programs designed to reduce the STI incidence, and HIV/AIDS transmission, among military and police personnel and their wives. There is evidence of positive behavioral changes occurring amongst uniformed services in Cambodia in target areas.



*The Cambodia's armed forces has trained on correct knowledge of HIV/AIDS to engage in safer sex.*

About an hour's drive northwest of Phnom Penh, in the province of Kompong Chhnang, is the headquarters of the First Division, Supreme Command Headquarters, Royal Land Army. In July 2001, 400 soldiers at the base were counseled and tested for HIV. "Nineteen were HIV positive, and one later died," reports the base commander, Col. Kham Chaovorn.

The soldiers believed HIV/AIDS was curable, like syphilis or gonorrhea. "Only when they see so many people die from it do the soldiers understand that HIV/AIDS is not a normal disease," says Col. Kham, who believes HIV/AIDS is a major threat to the country's national security.

"The individual soldier is the focus of the military. If we lose so many people, how can we support the country?" he asks. "How can we train sick soldiers?"

The colonel says peer education intervention supported by USAID through Family Health International has come a long way towards educating Cambodia's armed forces. He points out that about 40% of soldiers are illiterate and written information is of no help to them. "Higher ranking military have correct knowledge because of their longer training and tend to engage in safer sex," he says.

That belief is not universally shared among his brother officers. During a break in an all-day session for peer educator trainers, Capt. Tem Rany says the disease can affect any level of the armed forces. "Richer officers can afford to have many partners," he observes, "and that's not safe."

Post-intervention (FHI), and according to the Behavioral Sentinel Surveillance (BSS), military personnel are engaging in fewer sexual acts and are reducing in high-risk behaviors. Since men are mostly the decision makers in condom use and non-use, targeting men who are major client groups of sex workers remains critical for HIV/AIDS prevention in Cambodia.